

A NEW BIRD FOR OKLAHOMA:  
LESSER BLACK-BACKED GULL

BY JOHN G. NEWELL

From 3 February through 2 April, 1984, a Lesser Black-backed Gull (*Larus fuscus*) was observed repeatedly by me and several other persons at Lake Hefner, in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma County, central Oklahoma.

On 3 February I noticed a dark-winged, dark-backed, but otherwise largely white gull — different from any I had previously seen in Oklahoma — near the lakeshore not far from the southwest end of the dam, just north of my home. In this general area, and southward to the Lake Hefner Golf Course, the gull spent most of its time.



LESSER BLACK-BACKED GULL

*Note the slate gray mantle that contrasts sharply with the black wingtips and with the Starling in background. All photos taken 7 February 1984 at Lake Hefner, in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, by John S. Shackford.*

Next day, I received a telephone call from Philip Pearce, a native of England presently living in Edmond, Oklahoma. His rather casual report of birds he had observed that day near my home at Lake Hefner included a Lesser Black-backed Gull in second winter plumage. Pearce is an enthusiastic birder with considerable experience in Great Britain, so I was delighted to have his identification of this European species.

Over the next several weeks the gull was carefully observed repeatedly by perhaps a dozen experienced bird students, and photographed many times. Three important points of identification seem indisputable. First, the mantle color was neither the characteristic light gray of most gulls, nor almost black as in some others, including one race of the Lesser Black-backed Gull. It was instead a slate gray color intermediate between the two (see cover photograph). Second, the bird was intermediate in size between a Ring-billed Gull (*Larus delawarensis*) and a Herring Gull (*Larus argentatus*) as may be seen in Figure 2. This size difference was checked often against many different individuals of the other two species. And third, much of the underwing was also slate gray in color (Fig. 3). On a worldwide basis, the only bird I found in my numerous identification guides with all three characteristics is the Lesser Black-backed Gull, of which there are three subspecies: *fuscus*, *intermedius*, and *graellsii*. This bird obviously was not *L. f. fuscus*, an almost black-backed bird. On the basis of distributional records discussed later the bird most likely was *L.f. graellsii*. A critical examination of the photos by qualified taxonomists may be sufficient to exclude *intermedius* as a possibility. The following details from my field notes substantiate Pearce's contention that the gull was in its second winter plumage, and many of them can be verified by the photographs. The upper mandible had two nearly black bands between three lighter ones, best seen in the cover photograph. Only the outer one-half of the lower mandible was dark. The eye color appeared brown or tan, but it was definitely not yellow. Crown, face and nape were finely streaked with gray. The mantle was uniformly dark slaty gray except for white tips on the scapulars. Also very dark were the wings, particularly the outer primaries, their greater coverts, and the other greater coverts, all of which were blackish. The lesser wing coverts were lighter gray or even brownish gray. Most of the coverts had light narrow margins producing a subtle "scaly" or "mottled" pattern. Both from above and below the extended wings showed white trailing edges in flight, resulting from the white tips of the secondary and innermost primary feathers. At rest the wingtips extended well beyond the end of the tail. The narrow gray bars on the tail feathers were spaced increasingly closer distally. At a distance, this produced a very dark subterminal tail band about two inches wide. The two central tail feathers lacked the dark band and appeared whiter, perhaps the result of a plumage change. The legs were very pale yellowish, almost an ashy gray, certainly not pink. Nothing that anyone observed about the bird suggested a hybrid or otherwise aberrant gull.

The known breeding range of *Larus fuscus graellsii* extends from coastal western Europe westward to southern Iceland, where the bird appears to have established itself in the early 1900's. In his book "Iceland Summer", George



*Fig. 2. Lesser Black-backed Gull, with wingtips extending beyond tail, is larger than the Ring-billed Gull standing in left foreground but smaller than the pink-legged Herring Gull behind it. Also notice differences in sizes of bills.*

*Fig. 3. Lesser Black-backed Gull, wings extended, showing black and slaty gray of both wing surfaces. Subadult Herring Gull on left.*

M. Sutton gives some interesting details of this range expansion to Iceland. He states that according to published statements of Dr. Finnur Gudmundsson, then Director of the National Museum of Natural History in Reykjavik, the Lesser Black-backed Gull was first collected there in 1913 and had begun to

breed by 1928, but that the species had continued to be "strictly migratory" (Sutton, G.M., 1961, Iceland summer, Univ. Oklahoma Press, Norman, p. 219). Peter Harrison states that there is "a westwards drift of a few individuals from southwards-migrating Icelandic population probably accounts for the regular, but small wintering population which now passes through Newfoundland, in America, wintering S to Florida" (Harrison, P., 1983, Seabirds, Croom-Helm Ltd., London, p.340). The species "has been seen in North America with increasing regularity, especially among flocks of migrating and wintering gulls . . . most North American records from Atlantic coastal plain but reports increasing in Midwest and Gulf States. Recorded in Northwest Territories, Manitoba, California, and Colorado." (Wilds, C., in Farrand, J., Jr., ed.), 1983, The Audubon Society master guide to birding, Vol. 2, Alfred A. Knopf, N.Y., pp. 64,66). Although they do not breed on the American side of the Atlantic, small numbers have been seen there even during the summer in recent years (Stokes, T., 1968, Birds of the Atlantic Ocean, Macmillan Co., N.Y., p. 106). Virtually all North American records of the Lesser Black-back are of the *graellsii* race (Wilds, *loc. cit.*).

The gull was remarkably easy to observe. Quite active and moving about considerably, it often chased and out-maneuvered other gulls for food. Occasionally it returned to rest along the shoreline mudflats with the numerous Ring-billed and Herring gulls where direct comparison with them was possible. The last day we saw the gull was 2 April. I presume that it left with the general exodus of our wintering gulls.

8304 LAKEAIRE DRIVE, OKLAHOMA CITY, OKLAHOMA 73132. 26 JULY 1984.

## THE CAROLINA CHICKADEE IN THE PALO DURO CANYON OF TEXAS

BY KENNETH D. SEYFFERT

In the Texas Panhandle, the Carolina Chickadee (*Parus carolinensis*) is primarily a bird of the easternmost tier of counties. But it occasionally and sparingly wanders farther west along the thickly wooded streamsides of the Canadian River and its tributaries as far as the Boys Ranch area in northeastern Oldham County. Rarely has it been seen outside these riparian habitats. During the course of the last 30 years or so, it has been reported only nine times in Amarillo (Potter and Randall counties), and then only in the older and more wooded sections of the city. The dates of these sightings range from 7 January to 4 December, with intervening dates in April, June, July, August, September, October, and November. All sightings have been of single birds and seldom did any remain in a given area more than a day. Only once during this period was a chickadee seen in the Palo Duro Canyon system in Randall County (on 27 December 1958, by Peggy Acord), and then it was listed simply as a "chickadee".

On 31 October 1982 I observed two chickadees, which after careful observation I decided were Carolina Chickadees. This was in the Christian Church Camp located in the upper reaches of South Ceta Canyon of the Palo Duro, in southeastern Randall County. Rather narrow and secluded, this canyon is